OVERVIEW

A new Time/CNN poll has found that black and white teens have moved beyond their parents’ views of race. This article reviews the findings of this poll of 1,282 adults and 601 teens (ages 12 to 17), taken between September 23 to October 2, 1997. Both black and white adults and teenagers participated in this poll.

Findings show that teens today do not view the problem of racism as did their parents and generations past. Teens say that "race is less important to them, both on a personal level and as a social divide, than it is for adults." Although more than half of both white and black teens see racism as a "big problem" in America, still a third classify it as a "small problem." When black teens were asked about the impact of racism on a personal level, 89% of them called it "a small problem" or "not a problem at all." "In fact, white adults and white teens are more convinced than black teens that racism in America remains a dominant issue."

This poll has also found that black teens are more reluctant than others to blame racism for problems. Twice as many black than white teens believe that "failure to take advantage of available opportunities" is more of a problem for blacks than discrimination. Despite this belief, 40% of black teens believe that the SATs are designed with great disadvantages to them. "These responses seem to indicate that black teens believe color barriers exist, but, despite that, they retain an admirably dogged belief in self-determination."

For an explanation of the optimism displayed in the black teens, the author suggests that perhaps a bit of naivete plays a role. Joe R. Feagin, a sociologist, speculates, "One word explains it—experience. You have to be out looking for jobs and housing to know how much discrimination is out there. People doing that are usually over 19." The poll also found that half of black adults say that they have been victims of discrimination, whereas only a quarter of black teens say they have.

This new optimism is growing against the backdrop of new challenges,
such as the growing number of hate groups on the Internet. "Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center says the number of ‘hate sites’ on the Internet—ranging from the Aryan Dating Page to the Nigger Joke Center—has doubled in the past eight months and stands at more than 500." Hate crimes reported nationwide rose 10% from 1995 to 1996. (The article illustrates some examples of the hate crimes that have been committed.)

An example of a cyberhatemonger is a National Socialist White Peoples’ Party member named "Wolf." He is a "‘good example of a youth recruiter,’" says a researcher who wished to remain anonymous:

‘He has a lot of catchy slogans. He seems attracted to kids who are having problems at home. He becomes their father. They’ll go on and on, talking about their schoolwork, their community, whatever is bothering them today. Then Wolf brings in National Socialism. He’ll say, "You can find family here."’

In the face of these new challenges, as well as the old ones, the teenagers who were polled preserve a "bracing sense of optimism." Three-fourths of white teens believe race relations will get better, as do more than half the black teens. Michael Eric Dyson, author of Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line, who is also a visiting professor at Columbia University’s Institute for Research in African-American Studies, says this:

‘What we’re seeing here is a hidden aspect of the black survival process. You imagine a reality better than the one in which you presently live. I wouldn’t call it optimism; it goes too deep. It’s hope. Hope goes against everything you can see.’

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

• What factors might influence teenagers to have a more optimistic view of race relations?
• Is this optimism realistic?
• What are some other "new challenges" that contribute to discrimination and racist attitudes?
• Do young people have anything to teach to adults?

IMPLICATIONS
• Though racial tensions continue to exist among black and white Americans, young people tend to be optimistic about race relations.
• Adults are more skeptical when it comes to issues of racism and discrimination.
• With more life experiences, one is bound to be confronted with more of life’s problems. It would be worthwhile to cultivate the optimism displayed in young people (while they are young) and utilize that hopefulness towards racial reconciliation.

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